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Quality Control of Provided Services by Mystery Shopping Method

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Abstract

Personal selling is the interpersonal process characterized by direct interaction between seller and customer. Its main objective is to persuade the customer to buy the product and achieve his satisfaction. This process is really pretentious on the professionalism of staff and the level of their expert knowledge and skills. Assessing the level of the customer service in a discreet and professional way is allowed by Mystery Shopping Method. The aim of the study was to review the level of the quality of provided services through mystery shopping method, with a focus on personal selling of the three largest telecommunications services providers on the Slovak market, in the regions of Zvolen and Banská Bystrica. The research was carried out in selected stores within two phases – time before Christmas and ordinary day. The conclusion provides information about achieved results, and at the same time, makes recommendations for personal contact with the customer, addressed to service providers in general.

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1. Introduction

Personal selling can be defined as the interpersonal process in which communication between a salesperson and a perspective customer takes a place. Within this person-to-person process the seller learns about the customers' needs, and tries to satisfy them to the highest possible level by offering the opportunity to buy something of value. Therefore, the salesperson has to be able to persuade the customer of the advantages of a specific good or service and communicates his satisfactions. For that reason, personal selling is one of the best marketing communication

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tools for building a long-term relationship between the company and the customer (Cant, Heerden, 2006). We can identify a several important characteristics of personal selling: “it is flexible, it builds relationships, it allows form more efficient communication, it is a form of dyadic communication, it can be expensive and sometimes it may involve unethical practices” (Cant, Heerden, 2006, p.4). Personal selling is required during offering complex products, which are characterized by the need of personal counselling. This process is really pretentious on the professionalism of staff and the level of their expert knowledge and skills. The level of these factors often creates opinions of customers on the company brand, as well as on the products themselves. Therefore the continuous improvement of the customer service is important and actual issue.

The main part of sale of the three biggest telecommunications providers in the Slovak Republic (Slovak Telecom – ST, Orange Slovakia – OS, Telefónica Slovakia – TS) takes the form of personal selling, while communication between salespersons and customers is based on the existing standards that create the standardized sales conversation. It represents a working procedure – the basic rules of communication during the sale process, designed for salespersons working in salesrooms. The basic reason for developing that standardized sales conversation is to provide the same care to all customers or the care that everyone generally expects in the role of the customer. Through the “sales tree” companies provide to sellers instructions how to create communication with a client and increase his satisfaction in order to achieve objectives set by these companies. The standardized sales conversation is divided into four parts. All of them have to be followed during personal selling, it is unacceptable to miss any part or adapt the conversation to own needs and criteria (Table 1).

Table 1. The standardized sales conversation.

Part	Level	Contents
I. INTRODUCTION	1. Complimentary Level	a) eye contact b) smile c) greeting d) take a seat e) „WAO” effect“ f) first question „BRIDGE“
	2. Emotive Level	
II. IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS	3. Profile of the Customer	g) analysis h) cross-sell i) resume j) confirmation question
	4. Summary	
III. OFFER	5. Presentation	k) presentation of offer l) presentation of service's value m) product + added value n) visualisation
	6. Argumentation	
IV. CONCLUSION	7. Close the Deal	o) question for buying p) argumentation r) acknowledgements s) invitation + contact t) greeting CONTACTING
	8. Farewell	

Source: Telefónica Slovakia, Ltd. Predaj pomocou predajného stromu. 2011. p. 1.

It is sometimes very difficult to get objective information about the quality of the customer service. In these cases mystery shopping method is appropriate to use. It allows assessing the level of the customer service in a discreet and professional way. “Mystery shopping is a tool used by companies to measure the quality of service, food and the over-all experience of the everyday customer” (PamInCa, 2009, p.3). This term describes “a form of the research where by individuals’ measure any type of the customer service process by acting as actual or the potential customer and in some way report back on the experience, in a detailed and, as far as possible, objective way” (Turner, 2007, p.333). Mystery shopping is done by participant observers called mystery shoppers or ghost shoppers. They visit salesroom of the client companies “disguised as normal customer” and ask questions, make a purchase and a return to test the level of the service quality (Stucker, 2005). They seek to evaluate the businesses and the employees and to ensure that companies’ standards are followed in the ways intended by an organization (Turner, 2007). The observance of anonymity of that process is really important. If mystery shopper was revealed, the behaviour of

personnel would change and it would affect the objectivity of the research results. After mystery shopping, mystery shopper completes a report or questionnaire in which informs about results of the visit (Stucker, 2005).

It is necessary to create the checklist before mystery shopping. It is the control sheet or a list of activities that are related to the specific workplace. The checklist represents a guide and a tool for control (Urban, 2011). It consists of the evaluation criteria that are defined through the analysis of the job position. It presents predetermined formulation related to the behaviour of staff and mystery shopper indicates whether a certain type of behaviour is typical for workers or not (Wagnerová, Baarová, 2008). Because of the opportunity to compare the results of repeated mystery shopping, or among different organizations, it is important to use the same design of the control sheet.

The type of clients who use mystery shopping cover a wide spectrum within the public and private sector, especially the fields characterized by direct interaction between seller and customer. It can be also successfully practiced even in the state and local government, in order to detect a corrupt behaviour (Allison, 2006).

The aim of the study is to review the level of the quality of provided services through mystery shopping method, with a focus on personal selling of the three largest telecommunications service providers in the Slovak market, in the selected regions of Zvolen and Banská Bystrica. The work is aimed to verify the theory which is based on the fact that sellers should follow the prescribed standards during the sales process. We decided to evaluate of sales skills of staff in the area of telecommunication services, because these corporations use personal selling for the main part of the total sale. They are very successful in the Slovak market, but also abroad, therefore we can assume a lot of experience in this field. We can also expect a detailed knowledge of that issue, as well as professionally educated and trained sellers.

2. Material and Methods

Mystery shopping was conducted in the all 14 stores (six stores of the Slovak Telekom, six stores of the Orange Slovakia, two stores of the Telefónica Slovakia) of the three biggest telecommunication providers located in the regions of Zvolen and Banská Bystrica. The quality control was carried out within two phases and its objective was to monitor and evaluate skills of staff to solve routine problem – an offer of voice service with a mobile phone. The first phase was focused on monitoring if sellers during time before Christmas have to work under the time pressure that forces them to choose between respecting the communication standards or to deal with the customer in a shorter time. The second phase was aimed to evaluate sales skills of staff during ordinary day. We monitored their ability to observe the standardized sales conversation under the following conditions - they have got enough time for each customer and they are not negatively affected by the extreme urgency that would have forced them to skip or miss some steps of the prescribed sales conversation. Mystery shopping was based on the following schedule (Table 2).

Table 2. Mystery shopping schedule.

	Phase 1	Phase 2
Subject of Control	routine problem in time before Christmas	routine problem in ordinary day
Date of Control	12 December, 2012 – 14 December, 2012	18 February, 2013 – 21 February, 2013
Time of Control	1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.	12:00 p.m. - 4.00 p.m.

The tool of mystery shopping in the both phases was a checklist. It was drawn up with a regard to the prescribed standardized sales conversation in the field of telecommunications providers. Within mystery shopping were evaluated four areas of the sales conversation – Introduction, Identification of Needs, Offer and Conclusion. The scenario and course of the visits were based on the checklist. The level of sales skills was evaluated by assigning a certain number of points for each criterion in the checklist. We determined the maximum number of points for each criterion and for all parts of the sales conversation. The overall checklist consisted of 41 questions and the structure of point's score is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Structure of point's score of checklist.

Checklist	Introduction	Identification of needs	Offer	Conclusion	Total
Number of Questions/Criteria	8	12	11	10	41
Number of Points	21	27	29	23	100

Based on the total points a percentage results was calculated. The result of a calculation was related to a certain level of sales skills (Table 4).

Table 4. The level of sales skills.

Result [%]	Review	Description
100 - 90	excellent	seller's knowledge about the standardized sales conversation are excellent and he/she can apply them in practice without any problems
89 - 80	very good	theoretical knowledge and practical sales skills are very good
79 - 70	good	seller's knowledge about the standardized sales conversation are good, but he/she cannot apply them in practice without any problems
69 - 60	moderate	seller's sales skills are characterized by lack of theoretical knowledge and numerous shortcomings, so he/she is not able to follow required standards of the sales process
59 - 50	satisfactory	seller's theoretical knowledge are satisfactory, therefore he/she is not able to keep the conversation with the customer according to the standardized procedure
less than 50	failed	seller does not have enough theoretical background about sales standards, so his/her efficiency of labour is very low

In connection with the timing of the two different phases of mystery shopping, as well as the expected results, the following premises were formulated:

Premise I: Phase 1 - a larger number of customers in the stores, a longer waiting time and a reduction of the length of the sales conversation by a seller associated with skipping of some parts in order to serve as many customers in a short time.

Premise II: Phase 2 - a smaller number of customers in the stores, a shorter waiting time, an extension of the sales conversation and an effort of sellers to go through the whole standard sales process, without skipping some parts.

Premise III: Better results of the level of sales skills in second phase compared to the first phase.

Based on the collected data of mystery shopping in individual stores, the key parts of sales conversation were identified. Subsequently, the basic recommendations for personal contact with the customer, addressed to services providers in general, were formulated by the inductive and deductive methods.

3. Results

The first phase of mystery shopping was focused on the evaluation of sales skills of sellers in the time before Christmas. We can conclude there are much more customers in the stores of telecommunication providers during this period. Sellers have to work under the time pressure during this period. The level of their sales skills and working results are often affected by this fact. Table 5 captures the achieved results of the first phase of the quality control.

Table 5. Results of the first phase.

Com.	Store/Part of checklist	Introduction		Identification of needs		Offer		Conclusion		Total	
	Results	points	%	points	%	points	%	points	%	points	%
ST	Slovak Telecom 1	16	76	18	67	12	41	14	61	60	60
	Slovak Telecom 2	13	62	19	70	20	69	7	30	59	59
	Slovak Telecom 3	20	95	23	85	22	76	21	91	86	86
	Slovak Telecom 4	17	81	24	89	24	83	17	74	82	82
	Slovak Telecom 5	10	48	7	26	10	34	6	26	33	33
	Slovak Telecom 6	12	57	22	81	18	62	14	61	66	66
OS	Orange Slovakia 1	16	76	18	67	22	76	12	52	68	68
	Orange Slovakia 2	13	62	17	63	9	31	14	61	53	53
	Orange Slovakia 3	17	81	22	81	22	76	18	78	79	79
	Orange Slovakia 4	16	76	22	81	23	79	15	65	76	76
	Orange Slovakia 5	17	81	25	93	26	90	19	83	87	87
	Orange Slovakia 6	18	86	22	81	21	72	13	57	74	74
TS	Telefónica Slovakia 1	17	81	22	81	26	90	15	65	80	80
	Telefónica Slovakia 2	16	76	24	89	24	83	16	70	80	80
	Average	16	74	20	75	20	69	14	62	70	70

As is shown in Table 5 the ability of sellers to follow prescribed standards of sales conversation in its individual parts had varied from 26 to 95 %. Although, they were affected by time pressure the level of their sales skills was good, with a total average rate of 70 %. The best results were recorded within the part of Identification of customer's needs. It demonstrates a good ability to create a profile of the customer. The biggest shortcomings were identified within part – “Conclusion”. Sellers could not overcome the customer's arguments in appropriate way. This fact prevented them to bring the sales conversation to a successful conclusion. According to the overall results of the research it can be reported that sellers of the three largest telecommunications companies in the Slovak market are able to work under the time pressure and their ability to follow the sales standards achieves a good level.

The second phase of mystery shopping was timed in ordinary day. The obtained results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Results of the second phase.

Com.	Store/Part of checklist	Introduction		Identification of needs		Offer		Conclusion		Total	
		points	%	points	%	points	%	points	%	points	%
ST	Slovak Telecom 1	20	95	23	85	20	69	21	91	84	84
	Slovak Telecom 2	19	90	22	81	26	90	14	61	81	81
	Slovak Telecom 3	20	95	25	93	26	90	23	100	94	94
	Slovak Telecom 4	19	90	22	81	20	69	22	96	83	83
	Slovak Telecom 5	18	86	19	70	22	76	18	78	77	77
	Slovak Telecom 6	19	90	24	89	28	97	19	83	90	90
OS	Orange Slovakia 1	17	81	22	81	26	90	20	87	85	85
	Orange Slovakia 2	17	81	25	93	24	83	21	91	87	87
	Orange Slovakia 3	19	90	22	81	22	76	16	70	79	79
	Orange Slovakia 4	19	90	22	81	26	90	20	87	87	87
	Orange Slovakia 5	19	90	27	100	24	83	22	96	92	92
	Orange Slovakia 6	17	81	22	81	22	76	12	52	73	73
TS	Telefónica Slovakia 1	19	90	25	93	28	97	19	83	91	91
	Telefónica Slovakia 2	18	86	22	81	28	97	19	83	87	87
	Average	19	88	23	85	24	84	19	83	85	85

In the second phase of control the ability of sellers to follow the rules of sales conversation in its individual parts had varied from 52 to 100 %. The total average rate was 85 %. This result indicates a very good level of sales skills. The best results were identified within the part - Introduction. On the other hand, again, the lowest points score was identified in the last part of the conversation. The “argumentation” from the last part of the sales conversation (Conclusion) was the most problematic.

The timing of two phases of mystery shopping was strategic. Based on the results of research it can be stated that the Premises I and II were confirmed. There is an increased demand for services and products of these companies during the time before Christmas. The stores are filled up with customers and this fact causes the time pressure and it is not easy for sellers to follow the all prescribed steps of the sales conversation. Therefore, they often have to shorten the sales conversation to the necessary minimum in order to serve so many customers, to satisfy their needs and shorten the total waiting time. On the other hand, during ordinary day, they are able to go through all steps of the sales conversation and achieve a high level of success within the evaluation. Comparing the first and second phases of mystery shopping following facts were identified: the reduction of the waiting time from six to two minutes and the extension of duration of the individual sales conversation from 16 to 24 minutes were identified in the second phase compared to the first phase. These facts also support the correctness of Premises I and II.

The increase of total average rate from 70% to 85 % in Phase 2 compared to Phase 1 corresponds with the Premise III. In the second phase of mystery shopping the improvement of the labor efficiency, as well as the higher level of sales skills was reported.

4. Discussion

The control of the customer service was aimed to review the level of the quality of provided services with mystery shopping method, with a focus on personal selling of the three largest telecommunications services providers in the selected regions in the Slovak market. Mystery shopping was generally carried out in two phases –

in time before Christmas period and during ordinary day. All three premises were confirmed and could be accepted on the base of the presented research results.

In the first phase there was an increased number of waiting customers in the stores which was associated with a longer waiting time. It caused the time pressure and a tendency of sellers to shorten a length of the standard sales conversation. Their priorities were oriented to meet such needs of the customers which were the reason of their visit of the shop. In the second phase - the salesrooms were almost empty and this situation was associated with a shorter waiting time. Sellers have got enough time to deal with each customer, therefore the length of the conversation slightly extended. Also the level of their ability to follow the standard sales conversation has increased in Phase 2 compared Phase 1. The comparison of the achieved results is captured in Table 7.

Table 7. The comparison of achieved results in two phases of mystery shopping.

Com.	Store	Results (%)		
		Phase 1	Phase 2	Change
ST	Slovak Telecom 1	60	84	+ 24
	Slovak Telecom 2	59	81	+ 22
	Slovak Telecom 3	86	94	+ 8
	Slovak Telecom 4	82	83	+ 1
	Slovak Telecom 5	33	77	+ 44
	Slovak Telecom 6	66	90	+ 24
OS	Orange Slovakia 1	68	85	+ 17
	Orange Slovakia 2	53	87	+ 34
	Orange Slovakia 3	79	79	0
	Orange Slovakia 4	76	97	+ 21
	Orange Slovakia 5	87	92	+ 5
	Orange Slovakia 6	74	73	-1
TS	Telefónica Slovakia 1	80	91	+ 11
	Telefónica Slovakia 2	80	87	+ 7

Based on the results of the research it can be stated that sellers of the three largest telecommunication providers in the Slovak market are able to follow the prescribed sales standards during the sales process at a high level. They demonstrated a very good ability to communicate with the customer within “Complimentary Level”, to identify and professionally solve their needs. In general, within the field of personal selling, they can be considered as professionals with appropriate qualification, abilities and skills. Regarding to the scope and detail development of the standardized sales conversation, it is clear that companies are aware of the importance of the quality level of the customer service. They regularly check sales skills of staff by mystery shopping method. Moreover, sellers are motivated to follow the required rules because one part of their salary depends on the results of these checks.

Within the field of telecommunication providers, personal selling is one of the strongest sales methods because of direct contact with “consultant”. It is connected with a fact that customers prefer this type of communication because of complicated character of provided services. They need the explanation of the product, so personal assistance plays an important role. That brings a unique opportunity to use the power of argumentation, immediate feedback and the flexibility in obtaining information.

Although, personal selling is highly expensive communication tool it can be assumed these companies will still prefer this method of sale because of the mentioned advantages. It is really important to follow a whole structure of the standardized sales conversation during the sales process regardless of the time pressure or any limitations. It is unacceptable to miss or skip any parts of the conversation, especially crucial parts. They represent the key moments when the customer's final purchase decision is formed (Fig. 1).

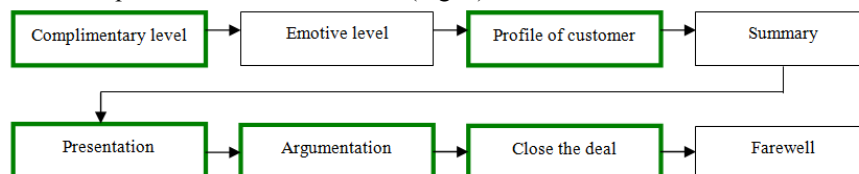


Fig. 1. The crucial parts of the standardized sales conversation.

The shortcomings and mistakes mainly within the key parts of the sales conversation could have a decisive negative impact on the number of concluding contracts and financial incomes which affect the existence of companies (Table 8).

Table 8. Consequences of the errors within the key parts .

The key part	The most often errors	Possible impacts
Complimentary Level	reserved staff	discomfort of the customer, creation of barriers and rejection
	lack of humanity	
	bad first impression	of purchase because of dislikes
Profile of the Customer	insufficient analysis of the customer's needs	inability to recommend appropriate solutions of needs and loss of customers
	skipping cross-sell	inability to identify the potential of the customer for using other services and inability to cause needs of these services
		the customer reject the purchase because he/she do not know a reason why he/she should buy a product, what benefits it will bring to him
Presentation	insufficient presentation a value of service	the customer is not interested in product because he/she do not know its advantage
Argumentation	inability of effective communication	the customer do not close the deal because the seller is not able to use appropriate arguments
Close the Deal	inability of argumentation	

Based on the results it can be concluded that the three largest telecommunication providers in the Slovak market have a lot of experience in the area of personal selling and direct contact with the customer, as well as a detailed system of the communication. They can be considered as one of the market leaders in the field of services providers, who set trends and standards. The basic recommendations for services providers in general can be derived from the principles that they apply within the personal contact with the customer. The type and character of these services is not important. The aim of these recommendations is not to copy the practices of the telecommunication companies, but only to get an inspiration from them and to apply such approaches that are proven, tested, and their contribution to company's acting on the market is confirmed. Company should:

- Ensure the most pleasant environment in the saleroom because it represents a place of the consumption. Telecommunications companies cope with this area of almost 100 % and therefore customers expect these attributes in similar competitors at least at the same level. It is considered as a standard that they evaluate only after positive or negative diversion from the norm.
- Ensure the representativeness of the visual side of sellers, that also has got own effect within the nonverbal communication. It is important to treat the uniformity of the dress code, in order to eliminate prejudices and discrimination.
- Ensure the professional qualification of staff in order to keep up with the greatest professionals in the area of service providers in the market.
- Ensure the continuity within the sale by a sufficient number of sellers in order to avoid long waiting times.
- Develop and apply rules of the standardized sales conversation in order to achieve a higher level of communication effectiveness and greater business success.
- Harmonize all elements of the communication mix in appropriate way in order to create and build the customers' trust and to eliminate their uncertainty within the decision making process.
- Facilitate an availability of the services by suitable location and accessibility of the saleroom, as well as to ensure affordable alternative methods of procurement of services.
- Ensure an appropriate quality of services to a certain level of the price, as well as guarantees.

In 2013 KPMG International, a global network of consulting companies providing services, performed a global customer experience study of the mobile market. They have 'mystery shopped' prepaid mobile products and services across 25 countries and made more than 850 store visits to identify better practices and trends in the prepaid mobile market. The results of this study and in the selected regions in Slovakia appeared comparable in general. Globally, the average wait time before being served was just under five minutes. Overall retail scores as percentage was around 54,60 - 82,29. The soft skills of sales consultants, including their body language, empathy, attentiveness and willingness to help were all scored highly and were consistent across the board. Their hard skills were also very

good; they were well-trained and gave all the correct information. They were very good within “Identification of Needs”, so they were then able to offer an appropriate prepaid plan which matched the customers’ needs.

Another study of application of mystery shopping in telecommunication stores carried out by Hol and Pazarloglou (2010) was conducted in 15 stores in Thessaloniki. The aim was to assess the quality of the service provided to the customer in the service offered by a major Greek telecommunication company. The results confirmed our findings, too. The staff members are very friendly and willing to help the customer. The employees are able to understand the clients’ needs immediately and propose the right solution. They have very good knowledge about the services. But in the time pressure they do not always follow the standards of the company and ask only basic questions in order to serve as many customers as possible.

5. Conclusion

“Mystery shopping has been a growing trend in the service industry to evaluate frontline customer service employees of the corporate owned stores” (Myers, 2007, p.5). It does not only help a manager know how to address customer service, but it also encourages employees to work harder and offer better customer service because they know they are being evaluated (Wilson, 2001). Nowadays, mystery shopping is used more extensively as a control method because of the ability of mystery shopping to provide required motivation (Garber, 2004).

The products and services of the telecommunications sector has gradually become a natural part of our daily lives. The three largest telecommunication providers in Slovakia are fully aware of this fact and they constantly provide more modern and innovative solutions. Nowadays, within the competition of the customer acquisition and retention, a level of the customer service plays an increasingly important role. It is based on the typical complex character of these services, so help and guidance during the sale is necessary. According to the results it can be concluded that sellers demonstrated a good ability to follow prescribed sales standards in the first phase of control. During second phase compared to the first phase of mystery shopping an improvement was noted. In general, they can be included among the best professionals within the field of personal selling in the Slovak market.

The level of the customer service plays an increasingly important role and it represents one of the keys to business success. The last part of the paper identifies recommendations for direct contact with the customer, addressed to service providers in general. Recommendations can help to improve the quality level of the customer services and achieve a customer satisfaction within any sector.

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